

CHIEFLY COMSUMPTION IN COMMONWEALTH ICELAND

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Abstract

For 400 years from 870 there was a stratified society without a state in Iceland. Manipulating reciprocal exchanges, chieftains built entourages of followers in other classes and coalitions among themselves. In their political manoeuvres, chieftains consumed such imported luxury goods as clothing, weaponry, wood for houses, and grain for brewing. Chiefly consumption and subsistence requirements for grain created demand for foreign goods. I analyze the social-political context of luxury consumption, and its relationship to the development of internecine strife from 1220 to 1262 which ended when the warring chieftains yielded authority to the king of Norway.

I Introduction

In 1262 when Gizur Porvaldsson got the Icelandic chieftains to agree to cede their authority to the king of Norway, the Icelanders demanded that the Norwegians send trading ships to Iceland in return. To get the luxury goods they needed to be chieftains, the chieftains had to give up being chieftains and the fundamental contradiction of stratification without a state. Unwilling to relinquish stratification, they were absorbed into a state system.

This was the culmination of a process that began shortly after Norsemen discovered Iceland during the last half of the 9th century and the first permanent settlers began to arrive. Those chieftains who opposed Harald Finehair's consolidation of the chieftaincies of Norway into a kingdom, or fell into his disfavour, fled with followers and slaves to other parts, some to the recently discovered Iceland. As British kings consolidated their rules, Norsemen in the British Isles found life less comfortable and joined their kinsmen in Iceland.

Landowners could not expand production by adding slaves, who could

produce little more than their own consumption requirements. Thus there was no use for large holdings. About 1000, people could not gain access to sufficient land to support their households and began to offer themselves as wage labour. They could produce more than the cost of their labour because landowners did not have to support them all year. Large land holders began to expand their holdings. There was no state to guarantee differential access to resources, but the system of appropriation of wealth was based on concepts of ownership and property. Thus individuals had to enforce their own claims to ownership by force. As they began to expand their holdings, these claims more and more frequently clashed and force was more frequently used. The necessity to maintain overwhelming force and build and maintain entourages and coalitions through social manoeuvre facilitated by the consumption, gift, and display of imported goods increased as the use of force increased. The process was self-intensifying.

Icelanders stopped bringing in exotic goods as they stayed home to tend to their feuds. Norwegians began supplying goods in trade for wool. When wool lost its value in Europe, the Norwegians were less welcome in Iceland, though their goods were in even more demand. Because of loss of profitability to the trade and increased dangers, Norwegians stopped frequenting Iceland.

As fewer powerful men competed for the domination of the island, the social means of gaining support – the consumption of value through display, gift, and feast – became exaggerated. At just this time wool lost its value and traders ceased coming to Iceland. Access to the goods of chiefly consumption terminated when they were most in demand.

II The Early Period

The first act of settler-chieftains in Iceland was to claim land. Their second act was to distribute land to their followers and establish household economies. The settlers brought stratification with them. There was never equal access to basic resources (Fried 1967). The settlers brought with them the tradition of local assemblies (*þing*), and about 930 established the general assembly (*Alþing*) based on the law tradition of the Gula assembly in Norway.

The Alþing was the major institution of Iceland. It met once each year and each chieftain was obliged to attend. Here the law was made and changed, and cases were adjudicated according to complex procedures. Of all the cases brought before the Alþing, very few received any legal resolution. More were resolved by violence or arbitration (Miller 1984). Even if the plaintiff won a legal verdict, enforcement was his duty, and

there was no "executive" agency to carry out decisions of the Alþing. There was no institutional means for enforcing stratification, only individual action. There was no state.

From recorded cases it is obvious that most decisions hinged not on procedural nicety, innocence or guilt, or any concept of justice but rather on the amount of force amassed behind each side (Magnusson 1977:23; Jones 1935:21). In terms of its real functions, then, the Alþing was not primarily a legal institution. It was, rather, an arena for building coalitions, for making, breaking, and testing connections.

If a person were not a chieftain, he had to follow some chieftain of his own choice. A chieftain had to be able to support and protect his followers. If he could not or did not, there was no reason to belong to his entourage. Chieftains had to be able to offer support and to deliver it. Hence they had to have sound entourages. Without an entourage, a chieftain's friendship was meaningless.

Powerful men made alliances with other powerful men. Mutual support, gift giving, visiting, and feasting were major components of coalition relationships. When a chieftain wanted to initiate an alliance with another, he would invite him to a visit, offer support, invite him to a feast, or give him a gift. One of the surest signs of friendship was mutual feasting. Each party would feast the other on alternate years as for instance Gunnar and Njal in Njal's saga (Ch 35). One of the surest signs of enmity was to attend different feasts close by to each other on the same occasion as e.g. Gísli and his brother Porkell in Gísli saga (Ch 15). The "feasting" unit is the same as the "support" unit, though it may not be very stable. It is for this reason that the sagas often record in detail who attended what feasts and how they were arranged. Such accounts indicate how the alliances aligned at the moment.

There were two sorts of groups: chieftains' followings or entourages, and the coalitions of chieftains. Both kinds of relationships depended on reciprocity. Both parties to a relationship had to see some advantage to maintaining it. Kinship relationships played very little role as Rich (1976) has pointed out. In fact many sagas (e.g. Víga Glúms saga, Gísli saga, Laxdæla saga) detail feud relationships between and among members of what would be bilateral kindreds, had there been such organizations (see Phillpotts 1913).

To be a chieftain, one had to be able to sponsor feasts with enough drink brewed from grain to keep people in a festive mood for some days at a time. As in any such system, whether a Melanesian big-man system or a Thai entourage, the largess of the "center man," "big man," "patron," or

chieftain provides the coherence for the group. In the Icelandic, as in other social systems, people must be able to predict how others will react to events. One indication of chieftains' ability to provide support to followers or other chieftains, was their observable level of wealth consumption.

The fineness of one's house, clothes, weapons, horses, and trappings all were indicators of a chieftain's ability to offer support, to concentrate significant force for his own purposes, and those of his friends and followers.

Major items of chiefly consumption were fine clothes; grain for brewing in connection with feasts; wood for houses, and later, churches; and weaponry. None of these was available in Iceland. In *Eyrbyggja saga* (Ch 13), Snorri Godi, later to develop a reputation for craftiness, is young and returning from Norway.

As they set out from the ship, these men of Breidafjord, there was a world of difference between the outfit of Snorri and that of Thorleif Kimbi. Thorleif had bought the best horse he could get, along with an elaborate, painted saddle. He carried an ornamented sword, a gold inlaid spear, and a dark-blue, heavily gilded shield. All his clothes were of the very finest quality, and it was on this outfit that he'd spent most of his travelling money [*fararefnum*]. Snorri, on the other hand, was wearing a black cloak and was riding a fine black mare. He'd got an old trough-shaped saddle, and his weapons were nothing much to look at.

Everyone kept laughing at Snorri because of his outfit, and Bork said he "took it that he had been unlucky with this wealth" [*tók Börkr svá á, at honum hefði óhepiliga með fé*]. Bork was Snorri's father's brother. Snorri's mother married Bork after her first husband, Snorri's father, was killed in a feud which is related in detail in *Gisla saga*. Snorri would inherit from Bork and he wanted to claim his inheritance immediately, especially the farm at Helgafell. When Snorri made his claim, Bork honoured it (Ch 14), but he said that he did not think they could share the estate. He offered to buy Snorri out. Snorri replied that Bork could set the price, and let Snorri decide who would buy whom out. Bork agreed and set a price on the farm, but stipulated that Snorri must pay the full amount immediately without going into debt. Snorri agreed.

'Obviously, Bork,' said Snorri, 'you must be thinking me very short of money when you set such a low price on Helgafell. But I'm choosing to take my father's estate at this price, so give me your hand, and let's seal the bargain.'

'I'm not doing that till every penny's been paid,' said Bork.

Snorri then paid the money and had as much left over. Bork accepted the money and relinquished ownership to Snorri. He said, “Your purse turned out to be fuller than I’d expected, kinsman.”

Bork’s expectations of Snorri are based on his appearance, a cultural convention Snorri knows well enough to turn to his own advantage to trick his uncle.

Porkel, Guðrún Osvifsdóttir’s fourth husband, lives at Helgafell, which Guðrún had acquired from Snorri. Chapter 74 of *Laxdæla saga* relates that:

Thorkel sat at home on his farm throughout the winter. He had a Yule drinking at Helgafell and it was very well attended, and all in all he carried on in great estate that winter. And Guðrún put no stop to it, but said that was what money [*fé*] was for—to increase your pride and prestige [*at menn mikladi sik af, ok þat mundi of á framreitum*]; and whatever Guðrún needed in order to live in grand style had to be one hand. That winter Thorkel shared with his friends many of the treasures he had brought from abroad.

“*Fé*” means “wealth.” “*Að mikla sik af*” means “to make oneself great” and “*framreitr*” are the forebeds of gardens, the metaphoric meaning is “to display or make a show of.” The sense of the passage is to use wealth to aggrandize and show oneself off. This is precisely the function I am suggesting for all of the items of chiefly consumption.

When the Icelandic sagas spend a few lines describing a weapon or a person’s dress, it is not simply for literary impact but an important sociological statement. From a person’s dress and weapons we learn what he has to offer in the way of support and whether it might be worth while to make a social investment of some wealth to make an alliance with him or her.

Chapter 32 of *Njal’s saga* tells us that Gunnar’s brother, Kolskegg, urged him to ride to the Alþing.

‘Your honour will be enhanced, for many will come to see you there,’ he said.

‘It has never been my nature to show off [*at hrósa mér*],’ said Gunnar, ‘But I always like the company of worthy men.’

“*Ar hrósa*” means “to praise,” with the first person dative pronoun, “to praise myself, to boast.” It is as though this trip to the Alþing, after his successful journey abroad must necessarily be boastful. Chapter 33 opens

with:

Gunnar and his company rode to the Althing. When they arrived, they were so well dressed that no one there could compare them, and people came out of every booth to marvel at them.

... One day, as he was walking from the Law Rock, Gunnar went down past the Mosfell booth. There he saw some well-dressed women coming towards him; the one in the lead was the best dressed of all. ... She said that her name was Hallgerd. ...

These two well-dressed people get married and have many adventures together until Gunnar gets killed. Their fine clothes are as important to social calculations as houses, horses, trappings, weapons, feasts, and gifts.

Contemporary and family sagas relate that travellers were lost at sea, captured into slavery, disappeared in foreign lands, or lost their wares while travelling, but they do not record that anyone lost a fortune by trading. In societies in which the market is the mechanism for accumulating wealth, trading is a risky venture, and there are stories of both great gains and losses at trading.

The great losses of fortune recorded in the sagas are social losses, losses incurred by inattention to maintaining a sufficiently strong following, or other social miscalculation. Hrafnkel's saga, for instance, describes how a chieftain lost his chieftaincy through inattention to his following and regained it by carefully building it anew. In Njal's saga, in chapter 117 when one man urges Flosi to kill Njal and his sons for vengeance, Flosi responds:

"I realize only too well that even though we kill Njal and his sons, they are men of such family and standing that we shall be faced with such consequences that we shall be forced to grovel at the feet of many men and beg them for help before we get clear of trouble. And you can also be sure that many who are now rich would be stripped of wealth, and some would lose their lives as well."

Wealth was accumulated and lost in social manoeuvre, not through trade. The Saga of Icelanders relates many incidents of people gaining wealth by marriage and force, even poetry, but not by trade. Consumption of luxury goods was one component of this social manoeuvre, and that depended on relations with Norway.

The system of reciprocal relationships entailed in the chieftain-follower and chieftain-chieftain relationships, here as in other such systems, is related to the consumption of display objects that indicate the ability of a

person to enter reciprocal relationships. Hence the central importance of the goods of chiefly consumption.

III Process

The cost of labour in slaves had been a constraint to the amount of land even a large landowner could productively use since slaves could produce little beyond their own subsistence needs. By 930 the island was fully claimed if not fully settled, and by 1000 some people had less than sufficient land to support themselves and began to offer their labour for sale. Chieftains and other slave holders began to hire labour and to free slaves since wage workers were less costly to maintain than slaves. As more slaves were freed there were more people with less than adequate land to support themselves and thus more people available for wage labour. Various forms of land rental also developed.

People used the land to produce grass and hay to feed cattle and sheep. The cattle produced milk products and meat for subsistence and wool which was made into woollen goods to trade for imported goods from Europe. With wage-labour, landowners could expand wool production and their capacity to import prestige goods. They could use the prestige goods to build coalitions and followings.

With wage labour and rental relationships, labour availability imposed no upper limit on the size of land holdings. Large land holders began to expand their holdings. The forms of appropriation of labour, both wages and rental arrangements, rested on a concept of ownership. There was no state to enforce ownership. One owned what one could hold. As people began to expand holdings, the level of violence escalated. By the mid thirteenth-century five chiefly families controlled all of Iceland.

In the second half of the 13th century, the chieftains of the Icelandic Commonwealth pledged their allegiances to the king of Norway, thus ending a nearly four-hundred year long history of a stratified society without a state and initiating a dependency relationship that would not be sundered until 1944 (Durrenberger and Pálsson 1985). The Sturlung age, the last decade of the Commonwealth, was the period of the kind of turmoil that Fried's (1937) analysis of political systems would lead us to expect.

Before Gísur Þorvaldsson succeeded in unifying the chieftains of Iceland in 1262, his enemies attacked him and burned his establishment at Flugmýr. He escaped though many of his allies and kinsmen perished. Chapter 174 of The Saga of the Icelanders catalogues the losses:

A great deal of wealth, much of it owned by those who were at Flugmýr when it was burned, was destroyed there. Many men had brought their valuables, their eider downs, and other costly possessions, and all this was burned. But by far the greatest wealth burned up was Gizur's – first of all the establishment itself at Flugmýr, which was unequalled by any other in Skagafjörð except the see of Hólar. All the buildings had been made with great care: the entrance hall was entirely panelled up to the main room; the hall and other rooms were completely hung with tapestries. Many treasures which Sturla's daughter Ingibjörg owned were also entirely burned up.

Chieftains consumed such goods as timber for houses and churches, grain for brewing, imported weapons and clothing to support their friends and followers and to indicate, by the level of their generosity and consumption their ability to support others (see Durrenberger 1976). These functions are integral aspects of the institution of chieftaincy which persisted from the first settlement until 1262. The context for the functioning of the institution of chieftaincy changed over the course of time (Durrenberger 1985), and the watershed was about the year 1000 when wage labour became available because some people had access to insufficient land to meet their needs.

With this less costly source of labour, large land holders began to expand their holdings. Whereas chieftains had gone overseas to obtain luxury goods in the early part of the Commonwealth, few did in the later period. It was more important to stay in Iceland to manage the entourages and coalitions necessary to insure enough force to maintain claims to land ownership on which the extraction of value rested. At the same time, and for the same reasons, the necessity for foreign goods increased. For a while Norwegian traders came to Iceland.

At the end of the twelfth century, prices for imports to Iceland became quite high because of scarcity in Norway, and because alternative sources of wool had developed in Europe. The price of Icelandic wool, the only major export product, dropped relative to grain and other foreign products. There was an overabundance of woollens in Iceland and a scarcity of grain (Gelsinger 1981:162). In 1192 there was a famine and 2,400 people died of hunger and disease (Gelsinger 1981:8). The Norwegian trade diminished because the traders had no use for Icelandic wool and had no grain to sell. The climate began to grow cooler in 1200 with longer winters and shorter summers.

By this time there were no slaves or freed slaves. There were people who owned land and those who did not. Among those who did not were some

who rented land from landowners under various types of arrangements, and those who tried to subsist on wage-work. There was also a category of homeless poor who wandered from place to place with no fixed means of subsistence.

Those who had access to sufficient resources to support a household were legally defined as tax paying farmers, *bændur*. Each of them had to be a follower of a chieftain from his own quarter. Chieftains were dependent on farmers for support – to feed their increasingly large personal followings or armies, to support them at assemblies, to accompany them on raids on other chieftains or their followers, and to defend them from such raids. Without such support and the ability to amass force, claims to ownership of land, which defined the class system as well as the forms of appropriation, had no force. Farmers had to rely on some chieftain to be able to defend their claims to property, though this might lead in the end to the loss of the property. Chieftains had to rely on farmers to enforce their followers' claims and their own as well as to expand their territories into others' and to defend themselves.

By definition, each farmer, *bóndi*, represented a unit of household production, and his main interest in the political system was to maintain that status. As chieftains strove to expand their power, their demands on their followers became heavier. The farmers wanted to live to cut another field of hay or sheer another flock of sheep and to collect their rents from their tenants.

There was a conflict between chieftains' increasing demands for demonstrations of force in support of claims to ownership and the subsistence demands, the economic roles of farmers. Chieftains sometimes used coercion to insure support. In spite of this contradiction, farmers had to rely on some chieftain in order to maintain their claims to land.

Relations between chieftains and farmers were not smooth. Chieftains had their "own" estates to support their establishments, and some maintained followings of armed men, but this was a difficult proposition, since it added consumers to the household without adding production (Durrenberger 1980). The chieftains had to rely on their followings of farmers to support them with both arms and supplies. This was one component of any farmer's household fund, his "rent" so to speak, his expenditures for travel and support for his chieftain, without which his chieftain or another would take his land and livestock. In addition, expeditions took labour from the farm and put the farmer's life at risk. Even so, a farmer's claim to land were not secure, since his chieftain might abandon him, another more powerful chieftain might claim his land, or

simply take it, or a farmer might lose his land in a re-alignment of alliances among chieftains, which were frequent.

Support of chieftains, even if their support in return was dubious, was one of the conditions for heading an independent household. Dependent people, renters, cotters, and others, went with household head. It was as close as one could come to a secure claim to land, and failure to provide support for chieftains was costly.

Independent householders appropriated the labour of the class of dependent renters and wage-workers. The chieftain class, who based their claims on hereditary privilege and attempted to back them with force, appropriated the products and labour of householders in turn. They sometimes met overwhelming force from other chieftains.

Each chieftain had to attempt to muster overwhelming force. It was therefore not possible to maintain any balance of power among chieftains. In order to gain overwhelming force, each chieftain had to expand, and on an island such as Iceland, with limited resources, any expansion was at the cost of other chieftains. Such attempts at expansion on behalf of all the chieftains provide much of the dramatic action of the Sturlung period.

The alternative to expansion was to lose influence, the ability to make good one's claims, one's followers, and one's power as a chieftain. Each chieftain had to expand his influence or cease being a chieftain. The resources for expansion came from the householders' funds, from the production they appropriated from the landless workers as they replaced slaves. The "social cost" of the system was the creation and maintenance of a large class of poor and landless people.

In these conditions the institution of chieftaincy became exaggerated, the demand for luxury goods increased just at the time when the foreign trade was falling off and the Norwegian traders came less and less frequently.

Both the increasing violence and decreasing security, were results of the drive to expand land holdings, and both reinforce the institution of chieftaincy through competition until the surviving chieftains are more powerful and more voracious, and the need and thrust for luxury consumption goods increased in pace.

Just at this time Norwegian traders found the trip to Iceland increasingly profitless (Gelsinger 1981). There was no market economy in Iceland (Miller 1986). The exchange values of goods against one another and standard exchange values were negotiated at quarter assemblies for each

quarter and at the Alþing for the entire island (Gelsinger 1981:35-44).

When they came to Iceland, Norwegian traders had to be skilled diplomats (see Sahlins 1972:303) to conduct their trade and return alive. They had to find someone to stay with, some chieftain who would support them while they were in Iceland, because they could not make a return trip until the next summer. They often fell foul of some Icelander before they could get back to Norway.

As the price of Icelandic wool fell relative to European goods, Icelanders attempted to re-define it by action of the price-setting assemblies (Gelsinger 1981:164-175). The Norwegian traders did not honour these tables of exchange values, and there were a number of misunderstandings between Norwegian traders and Icelanders until it became dangerous for Norwegian traders to go to Iceland and more likely that they would lose rather than gain wealth. For these reasons, economic and cultural-political, they stopped coming to Iceland, and the sources of chiefly consumption goods dried up just when it was being highly emphasized by the concentrations of chiefly power in fewer hands.

Ecological processes paralleled the social-political ones. On the basis of archaeological data McGovern, Bigelow and Russell (1985) show that the land was fully in use by 1000-1100, and that pressure on pasture and woodland probably had widespread and intense impacts resulting in environmental degradation. They go on to ask why people skilled in sub-arctic farming would persist in "practices that produced neither riches nor stability for the community as a whole".

They show that small and medium sized farmers were most likely to suffer losses in a bad year, and more so a second or third bad year in close succession, and to lose critical balance of resources necessary to be defined as independent households. After two or three bad years out of five, small and middle sized farms would cease to be independent, would join the ranks of wage workers, renters, or impoverished wanderers of the countryside. As the cooling of the little ice age set in such bad years were frequent and no doubt contributed to the increasing availability of wage workers and renters and the impulse for large land holders to expand their holdings. Many potential tenants were available and the turn-over rate was high. One consequence was that there was a decline in detailed meadow-by-meadow knowledge of particular places. Add to this that landowners were more involved in social and political manoeuvre than in farm management and we see an increasing distancing of ownership from management. As McGovern *et al.* say:

... impoverishment of smaller gothar and former freeholding

thingmen would actually directly strengthen the great chieftains both economically and politically – in the short term. In the bloody turmoil of the end of the Commonwealth, short term payoffs may have been all that mattered to the leadership of the day, and the early warnings of Little Ice Age and progressive environmental degradation may have been heard only by the politically powerless (p. 30).

The surrender of authority was the culmination of several self-intensifying processes. When some people had insufficient resources, they began to work for others. Landowners freed slaves to replace them with hired labour and renters. As more slaves were freed, there were more people with access to fewer resources, who were eager to work for others. Landowners began to increase production and expand their holdings. Because there was no institutional structure to guarantee claims to ownership, no state, chieftains fought among themselves for control of resources. The more they fought, the less secure was the tenure of farmers. Farmers had to support chieftains who supported their claims to land in return. Chieftains indicated their claims to position by consumption of imported prestige goods. They produced more wool to acquire more imported goods. As the process continued, fewer and fewer chieftains remained in the competition, each with greater and greater consumption needs, expenses, power, land, and labour. More wool did not bring more goods as its price collapsed in Europe. As chieftains and landowners spent more effort and time in violence they tended their fields less, and management knowledge was divorced from access to resources, a process that contributed to the degradation of the productive environment. More frequent violence meant heavier demands on the supporters of chieftains, until to support a chieftain was as risky as not to support one.

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